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Roulette In Russia as Brezhnev Fades

Behind the grim, fortresslike walls of the Kremlin, a secret, Byzantine power struggle is stirring. At stake is the succession to aged and ailing Leonid Brezhnev, Communist Party boss and supreme ruler of the Soviet Union.

At 72, Brezhnev's days in power are clearly numbered. Even if he cheats death for a few more years, the frailty of the dictator's health may soon force him to retire.

The failing Kremlin leader is crafty but cautious, perverse but predictable. The policymakers in Washington feel a sense of security simply from knowing their adversary. There is a nagging apprehension, therefore, over his increasingly imminent departure.

U.S. intelligence agencies are working feverishly to identify the ultimate winner of the Kremlin's Russian roulette. The candidates for the top job are already jockeying for position, forming alliances and expanding their power bases for the showdown. The outcome will have a lasting impact on world affairs.

We reported earlier the interesting possibility that Grigory Romanov—no kin to the pre-revolution imperial family—might assume Brezhnev's title. At 56, he's the youngest member of the Politburo. CIA analysts believe his success or failure may depend on how long Brezhnev remains in power; Romanov's chances are thought to improve the longer Brezhnev holds on.

Whether the "young" Romanov, an older rival or a consortium of hopefuls takes over from Brezhnev, one thing is certain, according to a top-secret CIA

evaluation: Any successor will have to have the support of Politburo member Yuriy V. Andropov, head of the pervasively powerful KGB secret police.

"The KGB has an important role to play in the succession process or in a period of political instability," the CIA's secret daily intelligence report has noted. "Any serious contender for the job of general secretary must ensure that he has the tacit approval of the security organ if not its active support."

Operating virtually unchecked by the 14-member Politburo in the savage days of Josef Stalin's one-man rule, the KGB's influence plummeted temporarily after its chief, the hated Lavrenti Beria, was deposed and executed in 1953.

But in recent years, the KGB has recovered much of its lost power. "The (1964) coup against Khrushchev, for example, had the acquiescence of the KGB," the CIA reported.

This resurgence puts Andropov, if not in the driver's seat, at least in a position to block the succession of anyone he disapproves of. His influence in the Politburo is abetted by the KGB ties of two fellow members, Arvid Pelshe and Kirill Mazurov. Andropov is also a close personal friend of Brezhnev.

The Kremlin kingmaker is tall, scholarly looking, and speaks English fluently. Sources told our associate Bob Sherman that Andropov is an "astute, ruthless party bureaucrat whose cold and calculating attitude" fits him well for his job as KGB boss.

The CIA experts won't hazard a

guess as to which of the six leading contenders will get the KGB chief's seal of approval. But they do discount the possibility that Andropov will be able to grab the brass ring for himself.

He is 65 and in poor health. Like former CIA chief George Bush, Andropov will also find that his assignment as head of the secret police will prove a serious political liability.